



Kit foxes, not much larger than house cats, live in the open desert where they make their dens and hunt in sparsely vegetated habitats. They rely on speed and proximity to their dens for safety.

Introduction

A wide variety of plant and animal species can be found at the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS). Representative of both the Mojave and Great Basin deserts, approximately 1,500 animal species and 800 different kinds of plants are documented at the site.

The varying elevations and climatic conditions at the NNSS contribute to the distribution of plant and animal communities. On the south end of the NNSS, Jackass Flats lies at 2,688 feet above sea level while Rainier Mesa, in the north, rises to 7,679 feet above sea level.

Plant and Animal Life

NNSS Animals

Mountain lions, kit foxes, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, desert tortoises, sidewinder rattlesnakes, golden eagles, spotted bats and kangaroo rats are just a few of the 1,500 animal species found at the NNSS. Invertebrates comprise the majority of animals on the site with approximately 1,200 species. Spiders, scorpions, beetles, centipedes and ants are some of these species.

Select Animals:

- A herd of about forty wild horses roam the north-central part of the NNSS.
- Fifty to sixty pronghorn antelope are found primarily in Frenchman Flat and Yucca Flat.
- Twenty to thirty desert bighorn sheep live in the canyons and mountains in the southwest portion of the site.
- Desert kangaroo rats are associated with loose, sandy soils at lower elevations while dark and pale kangaroo mice prefer sandy soils at middle elevations.

- Migrating birds and waterfowl are attracted to the many natural springs and man-made ponds throughout the site.
- Fifteen bat species utilize a variety of habitats throughout the NNSS including several abandoned mines, tunnels and water sources.

The diverse habitats and climate found at the NNSS make it an ideal home for many animal species.

NNSS Plants

In addition to the large variety of animal species, the NNSS contains more than 800 varieties of plants. Because the NNSS lies on the transition between the Mojave and Great Basin deserts, elements of both deserts are found in a diverse and complex flora. About 67 families of plants are represented; however, one-third of them belong to just three families: sunflowers, grasses and buckwheat.

Joshua trees are popular in this area and are present on the site in lower-middle elevations. The majority of them are close to 100 years old but are hard to age, because they do not have annual growth rings like most trees.

Pinyon pine and juniper trees grow at the higher elevations, usually above 5,500 feet above sea level, primarily on Rainier and Pahute mesas. In addition, the other vegetation at the NNSS includes grasses, flowering desert plants, succulents (yucca and cacti), sagebrush and creosote bush.



Desert bighorn sheep, thought to have historically occurred in the mountainous terrain of the NNSS, were extirpated but have recently recolonized much of their historic range from translocated populations in surrounding areas.



Three species of yucca, including the Mojave yucca (pictured here with blooming Indian paintbrush) occur throughout the NNSS. They have sword-like leaves that end in a spear-like spine.

Native American use of plants at the NNSS

Many of the plants at the NNSS were used by Native Americans. Food, beverage, medicinal, ceremonial and utilitarian plants were all part of the Native American way of life. Yuccas, such as Joshua trees, were used by Native Americans as a fiber source for baskets and a source for soap. Leafy plants and the flowers on Yuccas provided traditional sources of food in the desert. Pine nuts from pinyon pine trees were also an important source of food. Pahute Mesa offered several leafy food plants that were eaten as greens or added to other food. Mormon tea, common on the mesas of the NNSS, also had several uses. It was used to treat kidney ailments and as an astringent. Its most prevalent use was for beverages.



Several species of wildflowers are found throughout the NNSS, especially on the higher elevations of Pahute Mesa and Rainier Mesa.



Desert dandelion (yellow flowers) is one of the most common wildflowers in the Mojave Desert portion of the NNSS with spectacular blooms after abundant winter and spring precipitation.

Protected Species

The desert tortoise is the only animal species commonly found on the NNSS that is protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. It is listed as a threatened species, and the Nevada Field Office is required to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure that activities at the NNSS do not jeopardize the continued existence of the desert tortoise or destroy their habitat.

Currently, there are no threatened or endangered plant species known to occur on the NNSS.



For more information, contact:
U.S. Department of Energy
National Nuclear Security Administration
Nevada Field Office
Office of Public Affairs

P.O. Box 98518
 Las Vegas, NV 89193-8518

Phone: 702.295.3521
 Fax: 702.295.0154
 Email: nevada@nnsa.doe.gov

www.nnss.gov

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